The sonnet

The term ‘sonnet’ derives from the Italian sonetto, a ‘little sound or song’. The first examples we have are by Giacomo da Lentini in 1230 but the sonnet established its importance as a poetic form with Petrarch’s Canzoniere (started in 1335). Petrarch describes his love for his beloved Laura using the typical features of courtly love.

The poet is a man who suffers because of a disdainful lady who is beautiful, and often cruel. He feels contrasting sensations, happiness or sorrow, love or hatred according to the presence or absence of the lady or to his different states of mind. The contrasting feelings also depend on the inherent paradoxes of desiring the lady while not wishing her to surrender, of hoping for success while wishing to suffer for ever. The feelings of the lady are important only in so far as they concern the poet.

Petrarch idealized this kind of love and the poets who came after him took his sonnets as a model. In 15th century England, poetry had become dull and lifeless. In the Renaissance, English writers looked back to classical culture and to Italian literature. The sonnet appealed to the English poets because it provided a model: they had a new way of versification and new subject matter. Moreover, the sonnet was the perfect vehicle for English poets to express their chaste adoration of the ‘Virgin Queen’ Elizabeth I.

The Italian sonnet had a rigid structural form: the poet was asked to express his thought and feelings within fourteen lines. The Petrarchan sonnet is made up of fourteen iambic pentametres, divided into two stanzas, one octave and one sestet usually rhyming ABBA-ABBA-CDC-CDC though the rhyme scheme sometimes varies. The octave has the function of introducing a problem, of stating a particular situation, while the sestet provides an answer or comments on the situation and expresses the personal feelings of the poet.

The first English poet who introduced the Italian sonnet to England was Sir Thomas Wyatt (1500-1542). At first he simply translated the poems into English but, in order to adapt the Italian pattern to the English language (1), he left the octave unchanged and modified the sestet dividing it into a quatrain and a final couplet. The final pattern that was to distinguish the Elizabethan sonnet is given by three quatrains and a couplet. The usual rhyme was ABAB-CDCD-EFED-GG. This structure was more flexible than the Italian one and allowed the poet to use the form according to his needs.

The Elizabethan sonneteers preferred to develop the same theme in the twelve lines and give an answer or deny it in the final couplet. In other sonnets the poet dealt with different themes in the three quatrains and gave a solution in the couplet. The couplet is always epigrammatic, it has the function of summing up the subject matter dealt in the previous twelve lines or reversing the meaning previously discussed.

The fortune of the genre was decided by the publication of Astrophel and Stella (1591), a sequence of sonnets by Philip Sidney. A sonnet sequence is a series of sonnets on a particular theme addressed to a particular person. The commonest theme is love and in the case of Sidney it was the love story between the poet and Stella. In accord with Petrarch’s model it is a conflictual love, full of tenderness and bitterness, hatred and possession.

Another English poet, Edmund Spenser, wrote a sonnet sequence, the Amoretti (1595), which used the established Elizabethan form (three quatrains and a couplet). He restored the use of alliteration and his compositions concentrated particularly on the poet and his lady’s state of mind.

(1) English is very poor in rhymes so it would have been almost impossible for the Petrarchan sonnet to have developed.
Thomas Wyatt (1500–1542)
Sir Thomas Wyatt simply translated the Petrarchan sonnets or tried to adapt them to the English language. Here below there is an example of a sonnet by Petrarch and Wyatt’s version.

Francesco Petrarca
CXXXIV
Pace non trovo, e non ò da far guerra;
e temo e spero, ed ardo, e son un ghiaccio;
e volo sopra’il cielo, e giaccio in terra;
e nulla stringo, e tutto il mondo abraccio.
Tal m’à in prigion che non m’apre nè serra, 5
nè per suo mi ritèn nè scioglie il laccio;
e non m’ancide Amore e non mi sferra,
nè mi vuol vivo nè mi trae d’impaccio.
Veggio senz’occhi; e non ho lingua, e grido;
E bramo di perire, echeggio aita; 10
Ed ò in odio me stesso ed amo altrui:
Pascomi di dolor; piangendo rido;
Egalmente mi spiace morte e vita.
In questo stato son, Donna, per vui.

TASKS 1. Focus on *I find no peace*. The sonnet is based on contrasting words and images. List them in the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peace</th>
<th>.................................</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>can I not arise</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seize on</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locketh holdeth</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without eyen</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plain</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ask health</td>
<td>.................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I desire to perish, and I yet I ask health; 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sir Thomas Wyatt
*I find no peace*

I find no peace and all my war is done;
I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice;
I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise,
And naught I have and all the world I seize on:
That looseth nor locketh holdeth me in prison
And holdeth me not yet can I scape nowise;
Nor letteth me live nor die at my devise; 5
And yet of death it giveth none occasion.
Without eyen I see, and without tongue I plain:
I desire to perish, and yet I ask health;
I love another, and thus I hate myself;
I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my pain.
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,
And my delight is *causer* of this strife.
2. Discuss with a partner the most striking image found in the chart and justify your choice.

3. Why does the poet choose these contrasting emotions to speak about love?

4. Now compare Petrarch's sonnet and Wyatt's version. The English sonnet is the translation of the Italian except for two lines, which are completely different. Which ones? Compare Petrarch's lines with Wyatt's lines. Which version is more effective? Can you justify Wyatt's change?

5. Write the rhyme scheme of the two sonnets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Petrarch's</th>
<th>Wyatt's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Octave:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sestet:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are there any differences in the octaves? And in the sestets? Does Wyatt's sonnet still include two triplets? If not, what is the change?

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

Similarly to Garcilaso de la Vega, he was the typical eclectic figure of the Renaissance: a soldier, a politician, patron of the arts and writer, and a perfect courtier. He was member of Parliament for Kent and was knighted by the Queen in 1583. He lost the favour of the queen when, siding strongly with the Protestants, he opposed her intended marriage to the duke of Anjou. He was dismissed from court and stayed for a while in the country. He died in 1586 as a result of a wound at the battle of Zutphen, in the Netherlands, where he fought against the army of Felipe II of Spain.

He belonged to a new school of poetry and tried new forms and themes. His major works were Arcadia (1590), a pastoral romance written in prose interspersed with sonnets; Astrophel and Stella (1591), a sequence of love sonnets dedicated to Penelope Devereux; The Apologie for Poesie (1595), reprinted as The Defence of Poesie which was based on the contrast between new and old poetry and the function of literature in the modern age.

Astrophel and Stella, Sonnet XXXI

With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies;  
How silently, and with how wan a face.  
What, may it be that even in heav'nly place.

That busy archer his sharp arrows tries?  
Sure, if that long-with-love-acquainted eyes  
Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case;  
I read it in thy looks; thy languished grace  
To me, that feel the like, thy state descries.

Then even of fellowship, O moon, tell me,  
Is constant love deemed there but want of wit?  
Are beauties there as proud as here they be?  
Do they above love to be loved, and yet  
Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?  
Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?
**TASKS**

1. The poet speaks to the moon as if it were a person. Which words give human qualities to the moon?

2. The moon is suffering. What is the cause of such pain?

3. The poet and the moon share the same feeling. Circle the correct one/s.
   - joy
   - curiosity
   - melancholy
   - sadness
   - apathy
   - discomfort

4. Lines 10 and 11 are questions. Can you rewrite them using your own words as far as possible?
   - line 10: ...............................................................................................................................
   - line 11: ................................................................................................................................

5. Do the last two lines give an answer to the previous questions? What is the attitude of lovers to the people in love with them?

6. Write the rhyme scheme of the poem. Is it in accordance with the Elizabethan scheme? Give a reason for your answer.

7. Fill in the blanks of the passage below in order to sum up the theme of Sidney’s sonnet. Use the words in the box.

   In this sonnet the poet speaks to the ......................... and confides his love ......................... . He asks her whether ......................... produces as much suffering in ......................... as on earth where people who love are ......................... by their lovers who are ......................... and make them suffer.
Edmund Spenser (1552? – 1599)

He is the poet that best expresses the synthesis between the European tradition and the new English trend. In London he met Sir Philip Sidney and Walter Raleigh, who became good friends of his. Between 1591 and 1595 Spenser published *Amoretti*, a sonnet sequence which he dedicated to his wife, Elisabeth Boyle. He followed the Petrarchan style, though the influence of other writers such as Pierre de Ronsard and Torquato Tasso is quite evident. *Amoretti* deals with the love between the poet and a woman who makes him suffer because she rejects him then accepts his love and then changes her mind again.

Spenser’s masterpiece is *The Faerie Queene*, an epic work. The original plan of twelve books is incomplete. The setting of the book is Fairyland where King Arthur and his twelve knights search for the Fairy Queen. The poem is also an epic allegory in which each knight represents one of the twelve virtues that make a perfect gentleman. Spenser was influenced by other European epics, and Orlando Furioso seems to have been his model. The whole work is pervaded by the musicality of the verse despite the little unity in the narration; The poet uses a new metre, later called Spenserian stanza; it consists of eight decasyllabic lines plus an Alexandrine line rhyming ababbc bcc. In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser wanted to describe the Elizabethan Age with all its negative and positive aspects, including the religious problems which gave rise to the Puritan spirit.

Amoretti, Sonnet LIV

Of this world’s Theatre in which we stay,
My love like the Spectator idly sits
Beholding me that all the pageants play
Disguising diversely my troubled wits.

Sometime I hoy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.

Yet she beholding me with constant eye,
Delights not in my mirth, nor rues my smart;
But when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry
She laughs, and hardens evermore her heart.

What then can move her? If nor mirth nor moan,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

**TASKS**

1. First quatrain: the setting of the sonnet is the theatre where the only spectator is the woman and the actor is the poet. Use your own words to describe what the actor does.

2. Second quatrain: find the words associated with:

   comedy: ..............................................................
   tragedy: ..............................................................

   When do you think the poet can live in

   a comic mode? ......................................................
   a tragic mode? ......................................................
3. Third quatrain: here there are contrasting feelings between poet and woman. Complete the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woman</th>
<th>Poet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>delights not</td>
<td>My mirth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laughs and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is this conflict in accordance with the Petrarchan tradition? State your answer.

.......................................................................................................................................................
.......................................................................................................................................................
.......................................................................................................................................................
.......................................................................................................................................................

4. In the couplet the poet compares the woman to a senseless stone. He comes to this conclusion because (write TRUE or FALSE):

- ________ he thinks the woman is too young
- ________ he is not able to love her
- ________ there is no communication between the two of them
- ________ she is not in love with him any more
- ________ she does not share his feelings

5. In the sonnet the poet chooses the metaphor of the theatre to express his feelings. Can you justify his choice? Keep in mind the period when it was written and the ability of the actors to express many different feelings.
GARCILASO DE LA VEGA (1503? –1536)

Garcilaso de la Vega was the prototypical Spanish ‘Renaissance man’, a soldier-poet and one of the most influential writers to introduce Italian Renaissance verse forms, poetic techniques, and themes to Spain. He was born in Toledo and his father was a noble in the Royal Court of the Catholic Kings. Toledo. He spent his younger years receiving an extensive education, mastered five languages (Spanish, Greek, Latin, Italian and French), and learned how to play the zither, lute and the harp.

After his schooling, he joined the military in hopes of joining the royal guard. He was named contino (imperial guard) of King Carlos I (Carlos V of the Holy Roman Empire) in 1520, and he was made a member of the Order of Santiago in 1523.

The soldier-poet took part in the numerous battles and campaigns conducted by Carlos V across Europe, and his duties took him to Italy, Germany, Tunisia and France. In France he would fight his last battle. The King desired to take control of Marseille in order to rule over the Mediterranean sea, but this goal was never accomplished. Garcilaso died on October 14, 1536 in Nice, France, after suffering 25 days from an injury sustained in a battle at Le Muy.

Garcilaso de la Vega is best known for his tragic love poetry, which contrasts the playful poetry of his predecessors. Some scholars find that three distinct episodes of his life are reflected in his works:
- Spanish period: the majority of his eight-syllable poems.
- Italian or Petrarchan period: mostly sonnets and songs.
- Neapolitan or classicist period: his more classical poems, including his elegies, letters, eclogues and odes.

Influenced by many Italian Renaissance poets, Garcilaso adopted the eleven-syllable line to the Spanish language in his **soneto**. Increasing the number of syllables in the verse from eight to eleven allowed for greater flexibility. In addition to the soneto, Garcilaso helped to introduce several other types of stanzas to the Spanish language (the **estancia**, the **lira** ...). His works include: forty **Sonetos**, forty-two **Canciones**, eight **Coplas**, three **Églogas**, two **Elegías** and the famous **Epístola a Boscán**.

His poetry is characterized by allusions to classical myths and Greco-Latin figures, great musicality, alliteration, rhythm and an absence of religious themes. It can be said the Spanish poetry was never the same after Garcilaso de la Vega. His works influenced the majority of subsequent Spanish poets, including other major authors of the period like Fray Luis de León, San Juan de la Cruz, Miguel de Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Luis de Góngora and Francisco Quevedo.

**Soneto XV**

Si quejas y lamentos pueden tanto 
que enfiervaron el curso de los ríos 
y en los diversos montes y sombríos 
los árboles movieron con su canto;

5

si convertieron a escuchar su llanto 
los fieros tigres y peñascos fríos; 
si, en fin, con menos casos que los míos 
bajaron a los reinos del espanto:

10

¿por qué no ablandará mi trabajosa 
vida, en miseria y lágrimas pasada, 
un corazón conmigo endurecido?

Con más piedad debía ser escuchada 
la voz del que se llora por perdido 
que la del que perdió y llora otra cosa.